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Reagan Will Find U.S. Bureaucracy Well-Entrenched

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When Jimmy Carter took over the Oval Office in January 1977, one of his first orders was that all federal management regulations — those setting out correct procedures for circulating mail and filing documents, for example — be rewritten in simple English, and that unnecessary or redundant regulations be eliminated.

That was a simple enough idea, and a logical one for the man who had campaigned, as a "Washington outsider," against the excesses of big government.

But the outcome of his directive is one that Ronald Reagan and his aides should observe: after three years and nine months of bureaucratic battering, Carter's regulators have finally come up with not the changes themselves, but only a process by which the regulations could be changed in the future.

"Senior Civil Service people told us flatly three years ago that this simply couldn't be done," one of Carter's aides recalled. "They were saying that if you changed this word or that phrase, the consequences would be serious and unpredictable." And the problem is, you're so busy organizing your office and following through higher priority directives, you just don't have the time to figure out what the effects will be of doing something like that. So it tends not to get done very fast, — or at all."

As Reagan's transition team is undoubtedly finding out, the new president will not have the kind of executive authority that campaign-trail rhetoric implies. Those vows to "get government off the back of the American people," to restore simpler social values, to "make America strong again," or even to impose a freeze on federal hiring, are not going to be turned easily into reality.

To be sure, there are actions that can be taken, through executive orders, that could change the landscape considerably.

On the afternoon of Jan. 20, for instance, President Reagan could end draft registration, which is scheduled to begin Jan. 1. He could also make some symbolic gestures, such as abolishing the largely outdated wage and price guidelines, lifting the ceilings on crude oil prices, ending the grain embargo against the Soviet Union, and rescinding President Carter's executive order prohibiting the CIA from engaging in domestic wiretapping.

But crude oil price controls are due to be lifted entirely by next September, and lifting controls now would have little impact on market prices, industry sources said. The wage-price guidelines, Carter administration officials admitted, are largely ignored now anyway, and the grain embargo has never been particularly effective as an instrument of foreign policy.

And even if Reagan were to abolish prohibitions against domestic CIA snooping, federal statutes that back up the executive order still severely restrict domestic electronic surveillance. Any change would have to be fought through Congress.

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